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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001050

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: IS KDEM LE PGOV PREL SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: INDEPENDENT MP FRANJIEH TRIES A NEW APPROACH

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) MP Samir Franjieh, a founding member of the Qornet Shehwan pro-reform movement, believes the March 14 coalition has effectively worked its way into a trap, partly set by the Syrian regime, by focusing almost exclusively on the replacement of President Emile Lahoud. He contends that changing the presidency at this stage is beyond the ability of the pro-reform coalition and has, in effect, given the Syrians a blocking veto over any further political progress. Franjieh said the reform movement has been trying to implement democratic change without having first established a basis for it in civil society. He argued that Lebanon's politicians are now almost completely disconnected from the citizenry and have forgotten what last year's mass demonstrations were actually supporting. Franjieh and like-minded colleagues are preparing a "declaration of democratic principles" that will be promulgated (and adjusted) through a civil society campaign outside the normal political process, and outside the control of the crisis-prone political parties. End summary.

¶2. (C) Samir Franjieh, a Maronite member of parliament from the Zgharta district east of Tripoli, met poloff on April 4 in Beirut. The former journalist and author was one of the pioneers of the pro-sovereignty reform movement and first ran for parliament in 2005 on a joint Future Movement/Lebanese Forces electoral list. Franjieh has been keeping a low profile the past few months after receiving threats from unidentified (but presumably pro-Syrian) individuals.

¶3. (C) Franjieh readily acknowledged that Lebanon's pro-reform movement is currently encountering heavy seas, but argued it was not because they had lost the support of the vast majority of the country's electorate. Rather, popular support for democracy remains strong, but the leadership of the reform movement had made two serious errors: first, they attempted to tackle issues that were beyond their ability to deliver, and second, they failed to clearly explain the movement's democratic goals -- and benefits -- to the people of Lebanon.

A MOVEMENT WITHOUT A FOUNDATION

¶4. (C) Samir Franjieh said the movement was operating without a civil society foundation and, as a consequence, was extremely vulnerable to Syrian machinations. He argued that any Syrian success, such as the recent Arab Summit, was made easier because Siniora, Hariri and other March 14 leaders

appeared to be operating without the support of the general public. In his analysis, Syria could take its time and target each leader one by one, making it appear incompetence and hubris caused their political failing, rather than a concerted effort to destroy the reform movement by Syria and its proxies.

¶ 15. (C) The former journalist argued that if democratic reform was to succeed, the movement must re-establish its connection -- and legitimacy -- with the Lebanese people. He recalled that when it became clear several weeks ago the reform movement was losing its momentum, several members began to discuss a glaring political deficit, specifically, a clear statement of democratic principles that would govern Lebanon's transition to democracy. Without such a statement, relatively minor setbacks would assume much greater importance, and eventually prevent continued progress.

¶ 16. (C) Demonstrating an unexpected familiarity with American history, he asked whether the US Constitution could have been written and adopted by the people without first having been proceeded by the Declaration of Independence. Franjieh argued the Lebanese people need a similar declaration, to explain long term goals and provide moral support during what will surely be a lengthy struggle for sovereignty and security.

RETURN TO THE BASICS

¶ 17. (C) The member of parliament from Zgharta also said he and like-minded legislators would ask the country's political leaders to return to issues they could control, namely, economic reform, a new electoral law, and a concerted effort to increase transparency and reduce corruption. These

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objectives, he argued, could be achieved within Lebanon, without the need to wait for a recalcitrant Syria or the intercession of a wavering Saudi Arabia. He said he would urge the March 14 leadership to declare unambiguous support for a genuine Lebanese presidency and a commitment to disarm all militias, but to devote their full energies to those goals they can actually attain.

¶ 18. (C) In terms of timing, Franjieh stated that his colleagues would like to begin to circulate a "declaration of democratic principles" in the next few weeks, using civil society institutions and media to generate grass roots support. He recognized that in a society accustomed to being governed by strong leadership figures, the initial steps would be difficult, but he asked whether there was any real alternative. In his opinion, the political class was "obsessed" with a few nearly intractable issues, and had basically ignored the issues that the general public really cared about: economic recovery, elimination of corruption, re-establishment of domestic peace. With an ironic shrug, he asked isn't that what political leaders were supposed to do.
FELTMAN